A Single Decision (Take Two)

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Aboard Invisible Hand, on that fateful day above Coruscant, Grievous makes a choice that causes a few little changes for the Separatists and Republic alike. [rewrite of a much older story]

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Chapter Six

Blink.

Blink.

Blink.

Obi-Wan didn't know how long he'd been staring at that blinking light above the door. Every now and then the magnaguards would inject him with some kind of raw nutrient. He hadn't seen anything brighter than their eyes, his energy bindings, or that blinking light in what felt like weeks. Maybe it had been weeks by now... His sense of time was confused. Everything was confused. Even the Force.

The cell door opened, revealing the dark hall beyond. In came four magnaguards; Obi-Wan raised his head, they usually came in pairs. And behind them was Grievous himself. He shook his head, trying to dispel any hallucination he might be having. Grievous remained, looking at him with something akin to smugness.

"Ah, General Kenobi, we meet again. I hope you've found your accommodations *fitting.*" The cyborg laughed, which then turned into a cough.

"General Grievous." Obi-Wan said hoarsely. "Let me guess, your master won't let you kill me."

"I have no master now." Grievous planted his talons in front of him, and leaned down. "I considered killing you, but now that Skywalker can never save you again, I think I will keep you here for the foreseeable future."

"You killed... Anakin?" He didn't believe it.

"*I* didn't kill him, my droids did!" Grievous cackled again. "He was so focused on me, he forgot about the droids I brought with."

"No, that's not true. That's impossible!" said Obi-Wan. "A... a *battle-droid* could never kill Anakin!"

"I thought you'd say that." The cyborg reached into his cloak, and took out a holoprojector.

Anakin was battling Dooku right before the Chancellor, and in a quick move severed both the Count's hands. "*Good, Anakin, good!*" Palpatine said. "*Kill him. Kill him now.*"

"*I shouldn't*." said Anakin, holding both lightsabers to the Count's neck.

"*Do it.*" ordered the Chancellor. And Anakin did. "*You did well, Anakin. He was too dangerous to be kept alive.*"

"*Yes, but*-"

"*Kill them!*" Grievous roared. He flew down the steps, blades at the ready, and Anakin rushed to meet him, pushing him backwards, headfirst into the stairs. Anakin raised his saber for the killing blow, and then a droid shot him in the chest. And another in the leg, and another in the chest again, and they kept shooting until he fell. And then they shot Palpatine too.

"See?" Grievous's eyes betrayed the invisible grin he wore. "Twice the pride, double the fall, as the late Count would have said." Obi-Wan stared at the projector in shock, saying nothing. *We failed... I failed... The prophecies, the Chosen One...* "Perhaps I'll let you dwell on the mortality of even the greatest of Jedi for a while. I'll be seeing you again, General Kenobi, but not anytime soon!" Grievous laughed again, and made his exit.

Then, Obi-Wan was left alone, and the light above the door blinked on.

It had been a week and a half since the fateful day; Coruscant's sky was hazy with dust and smoke, but at least the fires were finally out. In the darkened apartment of Padme Amidala, Bail Organa and Mon Mothma exchanged another concerned look. "Padme, we need your help in the Senate. The pro-war crowd is louder than ever, and now that Admiral Tarkin has resigned his commission and joined them, they're only going to get louder." said Bail.

"I've heard." Padme said, looking sad and tired. Ever since the battle, it was as if she had been in some kind of gloomy trance. Skywalker and Kenobi had both been good friends of hers, and she had known Palpatine for most of her life. *To lose all three in a day...* Bail couldn't imagine such a misfortune. No wonder she'd given up on her appearance, wearing such loose and dark clothes.

"We have a chance to save this democracy." Mon Mothma added. "But we can't do it without you."

"Yes..." Padme nodded, but turned away from them, looking out the dimmed window to the city beyond. "Have they set a for elections?"

"They'll be seven months from now." said Mon Mothma. "Various senators have been rounding up support for their election for the last week. But it's far too early to tell who we'll be voting for in the end."

"Then we had better get to work." Padme said. She took a deep breath, and seemed to stand taller. "I've had a run-in with this Tarkin before, a few months ago, during Ahsoka's trial. Does he have any idea what he's doing?"

"I'd say so." Bail crossed his arms. "The pro-war party is fawning over him, calling him a 'hero of the Republic.' He's one of the few on their side that's actually fought a battle." He too had been on the front line, inadvertently, and Padme had been in harm's way more than once in this grisly affair. They'd both seen what was happening out there, and they both knew it had to end. The sooner, the better. Their political opponents, though... *Perhaps if they were the ones being shot at, they'd change the minds.*

"Another thorn in our side, then." muttered Padme. "How many have gone over to them since the attack?"

"Too many." Mon Mothma said. "They're frightened. The Separatists are stronger than they thought, and the war party is exploiting that."

"Fear mongering... Always effective, with this lot." Bail let his disgust show on his face. "We'll need to put forward our own candidate. The last thing we need is someone like Orn Free Taa as Chancellor. Or worse, Tarkin..."

"Why not you?" asked Padme.

"Why not, indeed?" added Mon Mothma.

Bail was quiet for a moment. "Are you sure that would be a good idea?" he asked.

"We don't have any other options." said Padme. "If we get a pro-war Chancellor, this will never end. And it *must* end. Enough good people have died already."

He nodded once. "I'll do it, then." *I'm going to regret this,* Bail thought.

"Tell me, Rear Admiral, what does it take to pry a *Lucrehulk* from the Nemoidians' hands?"

Kronaak couldn't help but feel smug at his promotion by Grievous. "It involved loyal service and strong words, Rear Admiral." His partner in conversation was Ricimer Eemon, the sharply-dressed human commander of *Morning Star,* the cruiser that had led the relief mission's attack over Sluis Van. Eemon too had been promoted for his usefulness. He was visiting *Aethra*, after Grievous had instructed them to think on what the Confederate fleet's next move should be. He'd discovered that the owner of the flashy *Theta*-class shuttle was none other than this man himself.

"Strong words? There's got to be a story there." Eemon prompted, looking around *Aethra*'s spacious bridge.

"I served as the previous captain's right hand, after he discovered my clan on Mintooine before the war, but he died in battle last year over Sullust. I took command of the ship, and despite Trade Federation requests to hand her back over to them..." Kronaak clicked his claws merrily. "I decided to keep her for myself. Seeing as how they are formally neutral, there was nothing they could do."

"You stole your ship, then?" The human looked mildly amused. "That's more exciting than how I got mine. My father tossed me the proverbial keys to *Morning Star* like she was my first landspeeder. For whatever reason, no one seemed happy about it..."

"I can't imagine why. At least you're on Grievous's good side." said Kronaak.

"At least. Speaking of which, we have work to do."

"Yes, right this way." Kronaak took them to the conference room behind the bridge, where OOM-27 had prepared a map of the galactic military situation. Despite recent victories, there was far more Republic red than Confederate blue. The Republic had forces attacking them across the entire Outer Rim, there were few worlds not now under siege. It was undeniable that they were losing this war.

Eemon was interested in something else, though. "The sheen on this table is ridiculous." he muttered. "Were you trying to turn it into a mirror?"

"Dress to impress, sir." OOM-27 recited from the Trade Federation's captain's manual.

"I couldn't agree more." Eemon nodded. "Let's get down to business: I can't say this situation looks good. Saleucami fell last night."

"We've all but abandoned Thyferra and Yag'Dhul, at least for the moment. While it's freed up several thousand ships, they were some of our last holdings in the Inner Rim." Kronaak tapped his walking stick on the floor. "I do not think we should let them go lightly."

"But we need those ships here." Eemon said, pointing to the Sluis sector. "We should consolidate our own remaining territory's security. Send what aid we can to our Inner Rim friends, and tell them we'll be back." He then pointed his own walking stick of carved wood at another part of the galaxy. "Here is where we should focus on: everything from Boz Pity to Toola. Maybe not Toola itself, it's militarily useless, but you get the picture."

"If by picture you mean the core of our industrial base, yes." agreed Kronaak.

"Industry *must* come first. Before economy, before propaganda, before political considerations. We cannot win if we cannot keep up with the Republic's industry. Not only do their machines out-perform ours, but they've begun to out-build us as well! And we're the ones with droids!" The human shook his head. "When my father unified our world, he did not start with the best army or the best fleet or the best factories. He had to build it all, and only by overpowering his rivals through sheer numbers did he win. Quantity has a quality of its own, he told me. And now he's Warlord of all Caramm."

"Even when we had full control of our foundries, we still could not keep up with the Republic." Kronaak said. "What do you propose we do different?"

"I fear we're going to have to become our enemy." Eemon frowned, and ran his hand over his beard.

"What do you mean?"

"Centralize the government's power. Put everything in Dooku's hands. No more Trade Federation this or Commerce Guild that. Switch over to a fiat currency and print as much of it as we can to fund as many factories as we can, producing as much material as we can. It won Caramm for my father, it could win the galaxy for us." Eemon folded his arms. "It won't be pretty, though."

Kronaak didn't even know what fiat currency was. "No, it would not. But the people will understand."

"Maybe. Morale was not good before our raid on Coruscant, the people are losing hope in our ability to force the Republic to terms. Most already have lost hope, they fight on out of spite." The human shrugged. "But with Grievous's back-to-back victories, maybe they will be inspired to go the extra step for a free future."

"The question is though, how do we buy ourselves time to do all this?" Kronaak asked.

Before Eemon could answer, OOM-27 spoke up: "Sir, if I might..?"

"Go ahead, Commander."

"We simply recreate the conditions under which we were winning the war." said the droid.

"Back when we could strike anywhere we wanted and have the Republic scrambling in fear." Eemon smiled. "Those were the days! But we simply don't have ships to spare."

Something clicked in Kronaak's mind. His mandibles wiggled in excitement. "We do have *half* a ship to spare!"

"What do you mean?" asked Eemon.

"Do you remember *Malevolence*, Eemon?" Kronaak clicked his claws together, and OOM-27 drew back from the table, as if receiving a revelation.

"Of course I do, who doesn't?"

"She was the prototype of her class, but all other orders were put on hold after the debacle at Antar. However, the Free Dac Volunteers completed the hull of a second ship on Pammant. I saw it when I was there last year." said Kronaak.

"But Pammant was hit by that Republic cruiser, fractured right to the core." Eemon scratched his head. "Did this hull survive?"

"It did, sirs." OOM-27 said. "They'd already moved it into orbit for transfer before the hit. At Mintooine they stripped its installed systems for use in other ships; right now it's just an empty hulk."

"If a second *Malevolence* does not buy us time, I do not know what will." Kronaak looked at the map, and the six islands of blue that remained in a sea of red. "And we need all the time we can get."

Esera's flight from her former comrades had taken her to the strange green skies of Terminus. The planet was the last trade hub on both the Hydian Way and Corellian Trade Spine, and a gateway to both the Unknown Regions and into Wild Space. Already, she'd seen more mysterious ships here than she had in her past sixteen years of life. For the moment, she had landed her ARC on an out of the way platform at the edge of whatever spaceport she had landed in, trying to figure out her next move. Sooner or later, someone would ask her to pay for parking...

That was one problem she'd need to deal with: *money*. Republic credits were not the preferred currency out in these parts. She might have to sell her fighter for scrap. *I'll need to contact the Jedi Council*, she thought, *someone needs to tell them about what's going on out here*. In the meantime, Esera decided to head into the city and see what she could learn.

The first thing she did was leave her Jedi robe in the fighter, she didn't need anyone recognizing her out here. Against her better judgment, she left her lightsaber behind too. This spaceport was a bustling place, but the signs of war were everywhere. Arms dealers openly displayed their wares, technicians were selling sensor jammers, shield generators, and armor plating, mercenaries waited around and discussed contracts with freighter captains.

"You heard about the Separatist battleship that was here just the other day, didn't you?" one gunslinger asked to a captain. "Asking after whatever it was they were after? You and I both know that they're willing to board anyone in order to get what they want. And the Republic too, for even more reasons than just business... Seven hundred peggats, and I will keep your shipment safe from anyone. That's my final offer."

"Fine, seven hundred it is." said the captain.

Business as usual in the hired gun industry, thought Esera.

A prime place for information in any spaceport was its cantina, but it was wise to be cautious in such places; that's what her Master had taught her. *Especially* in Outer Rim establishments. Esera ducked into the first one she saw, a dim and smoky place. There were only a few sources of light: the bar, and the two holoscreens. She was more interested in the holoscreen than anything else. At the moment, it was playing a Huttese program, and Esera didn't understand a word of it. Even as far as Terminus, the Hutts had influence; she hadn't missed the gunslinger using Hutt currency. Over on the far wall was the second holoscreen, one that showed a static map of the galaxy. As far as she could tell, it was a war map. There was a blob of red, and six patches of blue, with red arrows piercing through them.

Over the next half hour, the cantina slowly filled. Esera didn't even notice it at first, but all sorts of people were showing up. There were local workers, spacers, merchants, and all other manner of folk gathering. "It's almost time." a Duros standing near Esera said.

"Time for what?" she asked.

"News from the war, of course!" said the Duros. "This place has a private satellite transceiver. We get Holonet all the way out here."

"Ah..." Esera looked at the screen. "What channels do you have?"

"Only HNN and official channels, none of that fancy stuff you find in the core."

"Better than nothing." said Esera.

"We get a ton of Confederacy shadowfeeds, though." an Ishi Tib added, popping up on the other side of her. "Almost all of them, come to think of it."

She should have expected that, but the alien's phrasing was strange. "There's... more than one?" Esera asked. "I thought they just had *the* Shadowfeed."

"No, no." The Ishi Tib shook his head. "There's dozens, hundreds, maybe thousands. It's not a state-owned venture, like the Holonet."

"Madness. At least the Holonet is regulated." said the Duros, crossing his arms.

"Regulation stifles competition." the other alien quipped.

"Quiet, quiet!" ordered the barkeeper. "You all know what time it is." The patrons muttered and mumbled amongst themselves, and settled down, as the holoscreen was changed to the HNN network's channel. The reception was grainy at best; the familiar jingle of HNN's introduction played. Esera didn't pay much attention to it, it was the usual slew of updates on the Outer Rim Sieges. Everything was going well despite the tragic murder of Chancellor Palpatine, everything was under control. But when the channel was switched to a Separatist shadowfeed, she couldn't help but listen more closely. If she was going to learn anything useful out here, it'd be from her enemy.

There were two anchors, a Human woman who wore a tad too much eye shadow; and a dour-looking Muun. They sat in front of an apparently real window in a tower, looking out over an elegant city lit by a sunset. "Hello," said the Muun, "I am Nal Verik."

"And I am Sarina Crena." said the woman, with a big smile. "Welcome to this evening's edition of Raxus Today."

"We have a few stories of note for this edition." said Verik, quickly referring to a datapad. "More information has come in concerning the liberation of Sluis Van. For that, we go to Seka Yuva, our regional correspondent for the sector."

The screen switched to a Sluissi; she was suited up in ill-fitting body armor and a helmet that didn't sit quite right on her head. "Thank you, Nal." she said. "I'm here at the front line. Behind me, you can see smoke from an airstrike on a Republic artillery battery, and just moments ago, this position was hit by stray gunfire. Though the Loyalist fleet has been driven off by General Grievous, and the relief effort to save the starving populace is underway, the ground fighting continues as usual. Our forces have been bolstered by several million droids, many of which still bear damage from the attack on Coruscant last week."

She turned to another Sluissi besides her, one whose armor was much better fitting and ornate. "This is one of the Khedive's sipahis, Tewar Pasha. Sir, can you tell us about the current situation?"

"Until a few days ago, defeat seemed imminent." began the Sluissi, with an obvious accent that stretched his *s*'s out. "Our lines held, but my warriors were starving, and many of the civilian population had already succumbed to hunger. Most of us believed we would wither at our posts before falling to the invaders."

"But that is obviously not the case." Seka Yuva said.

"No, our good General has lifted the siege, against all expectations." *Hah!* thought Esera. Calling Grievous "good" was about as bizarre as it got. This was certainly surreal... The Sluissi warrior continued: "It is to our fellow Separatists we owe our lives, though. We and our families would not be here without their aid in sending food and medicine now that the Republic's blockade is gone."

"Typical Republicans." muttered the Ishi Tib.

"Like the Seps are any better-" the Duros shot back, only to be hushed by the crowd. Attention returned to the report:

"Sir Tewar, do you have any words to offer to our brothers and sisters in arms across the Outer Rim who are still suffering Republic sieges?" asked Yuva. The other Sluissi thought for a moment, hand on chin.

"Hope has not yet failed." Tewar said. "But if we do not stand together, we will fall. The Republic has learned this lesson, and we have not. Our fate can still be changed, though, and if our leaders are listening to this, I hope they realize that."

"Thank you, Sir." Yuva bowed, and turned back to the camera. "Yesterday, another army led by Feyd Pasha and bolstered by new reinforcements encircled several thousand invaders and clones, who were forced to surrender after two days of intensive bombardment." Footage of a long row of repulsor sleds shooting dozens of rockets of launching racks, arcing out into the night sky played, their screaming obviously toned down for audience. The scene then changed to a column of exhausted-looking non-clone and clone soldiers alike marching down a muddy road, arms behind their heads. Esera recognized the emblem of Eriadu on the armor of the non-clone humans. "This sudden reversal of fortune has come as a shock..."

More reports came in from all over the Confederate territories. Esera noticed that they kept emphasizing that war was far from lost, that the tide had changed before and it would change again, and that they needed to stand together if they were to bring the Republic to terms. *Morale is probably becoming a problem for them,* thought Esera. But if they could hit Coruscant and kill the Chancellor... Who knew what else was possible? Then Esera heard something else from the broadcast that caught her ear:

"And apparently inspired by recent victories, the Subterrel sector, previously pro-Republic in its leaning, has joined the Confederacy. The sector is commonly considered a backwater mining region of little importance, but their support is warmly welcomed by their new brothers and sisters in arms..."

Now that's interesting. Polis Massa was in the Subterrel sector, and Polis Massa was known to be friendly towards Jedi. It was a good bet that Aspar would be after her, seeking to bring his "justice" for her "betrayal," perhaps the Polis Massans would help her stay out of sight for a while? It was strategically worthless to the Republic, too, so the war wouldn't be coming there any time soon. *I'll do it,* Esera decided. She'd go to Polis Massa.

Now, how would a Jedi get into Separatist territory unnoticed?

"It's quite a view, isn't it?" Grievous asked, looking into the blue vortex of hyperspace. The vision was almost hypnotic. The vast windows of the observation platform made him forget he was on a ship at all; and if his mind wandered too far, he'd be tempted to think he was falling.

"No, master, it's extraordinarily boring." A-4D sighed. "What are we doing up here anyway?"

"*Invisible Hand* is my flagship, Doctor, and with Dooku gone, that means I get my tower back!" said Grievous, turning around and lightly swatting the droid's head. "It will need to be touched up, it's far too bright and empty."

"Those Sith types do like their austerity." agreed A-4D.

"And the Jedi..." said Grievous. "Your task is to make this place suitable for us."

"So draw the curtains, light the scented candles, and cover the bed in rose petals?" the droid suggested. That earned him a stronger swat from Grievous.

"You are a doctor, not a comedian!" hissed the cyborg.

"I forgot, you prefer cherry blossoms." A-4D said, unfazed by a third punitive attack from Grievous. If this droid didn't watch his mouth, he'd end up with a permanent dent in his head! "Speaking of things that make you unreasonably angry, we still have that Kenobi man in the dungeon. We've been feeding him once a day, so he's still alive, for the moment."

"Yes," Grievous growled. "I know he's still alive, you fool. I saw him the other day. For now, we will let him suffer more. But you have other work to do: bring my belongings recovered from Vassek out of stowage. I'll find something to do with them up here."

"And what about my equipment, master?" his doctor asked. "You did say *us*."

"You can do your work under the stairs, where droids belong." said Grievous. "There's that entire space under the raised deck leading to the elevator for your medical gear. And while you're at it, have this ridiculous table and these *towers* removed." He pointed at the sunken table, and the raised communication stations to either side. "They clutter up this room too much."

"Very well, master. We have plenty of time until we reach Serenno, I think everything can be completed by then."

"See to it." Grievous turned back to the windows. Being up here reminded him of his all-too-short time on *Malevolence.* What a wonderful ship that had been! Even now, three years later, an ember of fury still burned within him that the only reason the ship had been lost that day was due to the incompetence of battle droids. Greater than the fury was the shame, though. That, perhaps, had been the moment when he realized that not only would he struggle against the clones and Jedi, but against his own droids too. His failure with *Malevolence* had earned his own adopted home at Vassek visit by the Jedi, thanks to Dooku.

Grievous was almost glad that Dooku was gone, but now there was apprehension too. If he had anymore failures, he'd have to face Sidious on his own, assuming he ever showed his face again. It'd been a week now, and even with Gunray's new information, there had still been no contact. *Maybe he really is dead*, he thought. Being free certainly had its appeals, but now *everything* was in his hands, and his hands alone. The fate of the galaxy would be his to decide. The thought thrilled him.

If he didn't find anything on Serenno, then he'd give up on Sidious. Though to be honest, Grievous was primarily going there so he could get to Dooku's palace and its information before anyone realized he was dead. The notion of Ventress coming out of hiding to loot mystical artifacts had occurred to him... A rematch would be nice, but he didn't have time for that right now.

It took several days to get to Serenno, thanks to Hutt Space being barred to Separatist ships, and their route forcing them to enter realspace in occupied territory several times. Grievous clenched his fists every time he thought of the Hutts. Dooku, for some reason, insisted on respecting their neutrality, even though they allowed Republic ships in. For Grievous, that meant they were as good as on the Republic's side of the war. Perhaps his next offensive would be against the slugs? *Yes, that is a nice idea.* But it was just a nice idea, the same as facing Ventress again. While the Republic pushed in on the Confederacy from all directions, everything else would be secondary.

Grievous knew he had to cut his way through the knot of the Outer Rim sieges. Sidious said the end of the war would come not long after the Coruscant raid, but anything he said was now in doubt. For all he knew, Sidious might have been planning on Grievous's death over Coruscant in some kind of Sith game-within-a-game. Whatever he was planning, though, was defunct. Grievous had won, completely and fully. Now, it was up to Grievous to find his way out of this mess of his own making. Again, he felt the pang of *Malevolence*'s loss. If he had that ship back, this would be all so much easier.

Invisible Hand was greeted by the defensive fleet over Serenno, and he was given clearance to land, using Dooku's own codes. No doubt the traffic controllers thought it was Dooku going down to his palace. There were many memories in this place, for Grievous. He and the Count had trained in the yards many times; sometimes with Ventress there too, which had always proven to be entertaining. They'd both learned almost everything they knew about lightsaber combat here.

The interior was a darker place, both literally and figuratively. Grievous had suffered the consequences of failures before in those dimly-lit halls, and when he entered the building, he couldn't help but feel a looming shadow fall over his spirit. But here too had he saved the Count's life, though by his actions many light-years away. After the incident on Dathomir, Dooku had been more respectful of Grievous. *As he should have been from the start*. He could not deny that the Count was an effective teacher, though. And perhaps he still could be, even in death, if he had the right information here.

"We have lots to do, doctor." Grievous said, when he and his company reached the Count's personal desk at the end of the upper hall.

"If you wish, master, I can gather all the information on the computer systems." A-4D said.

"Do so. I will investigate his belongings." Grievous was curious to see if he had any more lightsabers laying around. "And one more thing: use Dooku's codes to send out a call for a special session of Congress to meet by the end of this week. It is time to go public with this change in leadership."

The weekly meeting via hologram with Grievous was over, but the real meeting had just begun. As soon as Wat Tambor and Archduke Poggle had left, they got down to business. "*Gunray, are you in, or are you out?*" Shu Mai asked. They'd had clandestine discussions of this for weeks, but with Grievous summoning a special session of Congress soon...

"...I am in." Gunray said, after a moment's hesitation. Nothing would have pleased him more than seeing Grievous destroyed, nothing except keeping himself alive, that was. He wasn't sure he'd remain alive for long if he went against Grievous. Then again, if he didn't, he might not live long anyway. Which is why he was doing this.

"*Good. We cannot let Grievous take control of this movement. He has no intention of fulfilling Dooku's promises to us, he does not even offer the illusion of sincerity like Dooku did. He also has no intention of ending the conflict, though this war is a lost cause.*" said Shu Mai.

"You can say that again." grumbled Tikkes. After investing his entire fortune in the Quarren Isolation League's fate in the battle for Dac, the former senator had been reduced to buying meals out of vending machines on their coreship base. *Trade Federation owned vending machines, at that*, Gunray thought. As of late, appreciating the small things in life alone had kept him sane.

"We have lost almost everything and gained nothing." said Po Nudo. "The time has come to take what we have left and admit we've lost."

"Perhaps the Republic will be lenient with us if we take care of Grievous for them?" San Hill wondered aloud.

"Perhaps." remarked Passel Argente. "I recommend killing him. We can make a gift of his head to the Senate, as a repayment for whatever crimes they want to charge him with."

"*Dead or alive, we must act soon. If the rabble on Raxus accept his authority, they will be signing our death warrants.*" said Shu Mai. "*Viceroy Gunray, do you still have friends in the fleet?*"

"Yes, I do." Gunray said, nodding.

"*Get them on our side. Grievous's ship is still damaged from Coruscant, we may have to destroy it to prevent his escape from Raxus. We will use whatever personal guard we have on the surface to contain or kill him. Whichever is possible.*"

Gunray could hardly believe what he was hearing. Shu Mai and the others must have had secret meetings before inviting him to join this one. It sounded like they had this all planned out, and now Shu Mai was just filling him in. They were bold, he had to give them that.

"Have you considered a local shutdown of droids on Raxus?" San Hill asked. "It would go a long way to isolating him. All that would remain would be the magnaguards he brings to the surface and whatever Raxus natives wish to join him. I can't imagine anyone would willingly fight in his name. He's an animal."

"A wise precaution." agreed Tikkes. "What can we bring against Grievous and his magnaguards?"

"Our friends in the Commerce Guild have sent two battalions of commandos from Castell. They are a match for the Republic's clone troopers, they will be more than a match for whatever local police forces Raxus can summon." said Argente. "*If* anyone would even help him."

"*I guarantee their quality.*" Shu Mai crossed her arms, frowning at nothing. "*If Grievous is affirmed as the Confederacy's new leader, we make our move. If he isn't, we take control ourselves and negotiate a surrender to the Republic. Is it agreed?*"

"Aye." said San Hill.

"Aye." said Po Nudo.

"Aye." said Passel Argente.

"Aye." said Tikkes.

"Aye." said Nute Gunray.

"*Then it is decided. We depart for Raxus tomorrow.*"

Later that day, Gunray called up Admiral Mar Tuuk. "Ah, Viceroy, it is an unexpected pleasure." said Tuuk's hologram. "I almost didn't think it was anyone important, you're using your code from the old days."

"I would hesitate to call it a pleasure." said Gunray. "I need to call in a favor."

"*That* incident was fourteen years ago." Tuuk sighed. "If you waited this long to call it in, then I can't imagine it'll be anything nice."

"It is not nice. But here is what I need you to do…"

Author's note: Ruh roh, this is the halfway point in terms of written material, I need to get moving if I want to stay on schedule.

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